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Claudia La Malfa. *Pintoricchio a Roma: La seduzione dell'antico*.

Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2009. 168 pp. index. illus. bibl. €24. ISBN: 978-8-836-61204-8.

Working for six consecutive popes and many other prominent patrons, the Italian painter Bernardino Pintoricchio (1454/56–1513) ranked among the most successful artists of his time. Yet within half a century of his death, Giorgio Vasari failed to discover any qualities in Pintoricchio's work that would explain this success and ascribed it instead to good fortune. Finding an explanation for this discrepancy between contemporary success and later disapproval, which has persisted until recently, is the main aim of Claudia La Malfa's book on Pintoricchio in Rome. First of all, La Malfa observes that Vasari knew many works of Pintoricchio only indirectly and not from personal observation, which undoubtedly influenced his view (32, 35). More importantly, his estimation was affected by a confused chronology of Pintoricchio's work. Reconstructing a correct chronology is therefore an important issue for La Malfa in order to reach a better appreciation of the artist and restore his place in the history of art. She starts with a helpful overview of the sources written during Pintoricchio's life and continues with a discussion of the works he painted in Rome. Here the subtitle of the book — *The Seduction of the Antique* — becomes relevant. The author studies the chronology of Pintoricchio's paintings mainly in terms of his response to recently discovered antique works of art, in particular the grotesques in the Domus Aurea. Thus she is able to propose convincingly an early date for the decorations of the St Jerome (Della Rovere) chapel in S. Maria del Popolo (1477–79) and for the Palazzo dei Penitenzieri (1481–83) — that is, before the Buffalini chapel in S. Maria in Aracoeli (1483), which has traditionally been considered Pintoricchio's earliest project in Rome. On the other hand, she comes up with good arguments to assign a later date to the paintings in the Villa Belvedere (1487–before 1492).

Convincing as these conclusions are, the discussions of the paintings suffer from an over-emphasis on the "seduction of the antique." Thus Pintoricchio's landscapes in the Villa Belvedere are considered almost exclusively in relation to antique paintings that were known from descriptions by Pliny and Vitruvius and possibly also from some remaining fragments (96–104), while only an occasional reference is made to the contemporary tradition of landscape paintings in Roman villas such as the Casino of Cardinal Bessarion and the Loggia dei Cavalieri di Rodi (106). Moreover, Vasari's interesting observation that Pintoricchio painted these landscapes "in the style of the Flemish" is totally disregarded. Similarly, the gilt details projecting from the painted surface of the frescoes in the Borgia apartment, which were one of Vasari's main targets in his criticism of Pintoricchio, are only discussed in relation to examples in the Domus Aurea, without any mention of more or less contemporary cases such as Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration* altarpiece in the Uffizi, Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes in the chapel of the Medici palace, or those of Filippino Lippi in the Strozzi chapel in S. Maria Novella (all in Florence). All these paintings were made for extremely rich patrons who wanted these works to

radiate their wealth, which was exactly the effect that Pintoricchio also sought. Consequently, Vasari blamed Pintoricchio for satisfying his patrons with dazzling effects based on expensive materials, but not with true art. By the time Vasari was writing, details projecting from the painted surface (whether or not in gold) were no longer appreciated and so his censure of Pintoricchio's work was partly anachronistic. Unfortunately, La Malfa has missed this aspect in explaining the discrepancy between the contemporary success and later disapproval of Pintoricchio's work, just as she ignores the fact that Pintoricchio had never been trained or active in Florence, and yet was highly successful. For these reasons, Vasari found him hard to fit into his Florentine-centered history and consequently included him as an example of an artist who gained short-lived fame only through good luck. Still, in spite of this myopic focus on the lure of antiquity and an insufficient answer to her main question, La Malfa's book offers a convincing reconstruction of the chronology of Pintoricchio's Roman works, embedded in a rich description of the context in which it was created.

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